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‘Housing problems ... are political dynamite’: Housing disputes in Glasgow c. 1971 to the present day

Historically it has often been easy for those in power, whether in local or national government, to try and ignore the concerns of those that lived in the housing stock they owned and managed. This was especially true in the context of increasing stigmatisation and ‘residualisation’ of council housing from the 1970s. There are obvious continuities evident in the neglect which led to the fire at Grenfell tower last year. The justified anger and activism both before and following the loss of life at Grenfell has historical precedents throughout the UK. This article takes a case study approach to analyse the campaigns undertaken by community groups in Glasgow from the 1970s and beyond to highlight the council’s blatant attempts to blame the residents for its failures. This was not a new strategy for Glasgow’s municipal authorities, which had been struggling with some of the highest levels of overcrowding in the UK for decades. Persistent narratives which stigmatised residents in the city’s inner city and peripheral housing estates helped the authorities to try and minimise or dismiss demands for housing improvements. This article highlights how activists in the Gorbals and Castlemilk fought back by drawing public attention to the conditions in which they were living. There are lessons to be learned from their methods and tactics, a heritage currently being drawn upon by housing activists in Glasgow today.

Keywords: housing, council housing, social housing, community activism, protest, agency, history, Glasgow

Introduction

‘The Grenfell Action Group predict that it won’t be long before the words of this blog come back to haunt the KCTMO management and we will do everything in our power to ensure that those in authority know how long and how appallingly our landlord has ignored their responsibility to ensure the health and safety of their tenants and leaseholders. They can’t say that they haven’t been warned!’ (Grenfell Action Group, 20 November 2016)

The fire at Grenfell tower on 14 June 2017 rightly shocked the general public. Rolling news coverage and interviews with local people highlighted the anger of the community at the persistent and long term neglect of the needs of residents living in the Royal Borough of Kensington ‘cheek by jowl’ with some of the wealthiest absentee landlords in the city. The Grenfell Action group had been warning the KCTMO management for years about the conditions in which residents were living, yet no one was listening. It would seem that not much had changed since the 1960s when Pearl Jephcott worked with residents in North Kensington (Jephcott, 1964). Indeed in spite of the ‘rediscovery of poverty’ in the 1960s, changes in legislation and the construction of new municipal housing, race and class remain barriers to accessing safe and affordable housing in London. The same is true in cities and towns throughout the UK. This article will focus on how residents in council and then ‘social’ housing in Glasgow have tried to make their voices heard and the obstacles they have faced. A historical approach is valuable as it is important

to emphasise that the neglect of the basic right of people to have somewhere safe to live is not new, but a long run process.

Glasgow: A history of action on housing problems

Taking a case study approach, the article will focus on Glasgow, a city with historically high levels of overcrowding and poor housing conditions (Jephcott, 1971; Damer, 1990; Johnstone 1992). This resulted in a programme of comprehensive development in the post-war years including the construction of peripheral housing 'schemes' (as housing estates are known in Scotland) and proportionately more high rise flats than anywhere else in the UK. By 1969 Glasgow had 15,000 flats in high rise blocks (Jephcott, 1971, p. 22). This strategy of comprehensive development and relocation has had profound consequences for the city's inhabitants (Collins and Levitt, 2016; Kearns et al, 2017). This is especially the case when combined with the effects of deindustrialisation and the simultaneous 'residualisation' of council housing (Forest and Murie, 1983). As a result it was increasingly difficult for residents of the 'schemes' or the 'multis' (as high-rise in Glasgow were known) to make their voices heard on the poor housing conditions they experienced and to be taken seriously by the general public given the stigmatisation of such areas and types of housing in which they lived. Residents were largely blamed for their own predicament as a result of insinuations about high unemployment, crime statistics and the levels of social security payments. Such judgements were a classic tale of 'deserving' vs 'undeserving poor', the attainment of 'respectability' and the stratification of the working classes, which has had a long history in the west of Scotland (Damer, 1989 and 1992). There was little acknowledgement of the structural causes of poverty in such negative attitudes. More recently such discourses have been prevalent in discussions of 'social housing' in areas throughout the UK with 'poverty porn' focusing on 'undeserving' benefits claimants. If such 'documentaries' are to be believed everyone in receipt of benefits is 'workshy' (Tyler, 2013; McKenzie, 2015). It is unsurprising that local authorities, management organisations and private landlords are able to try and marginalise the views and demands of those living in their properties. Even in the wake of the Grenfell fire such treatment continues, yet residents are taking action just as they did in Glasgow at various points throughout the twentieth century.

In Glasgow protest around housing quality and affordability can be traced back to the infamous 1915 rent strikes, the memory of which has been influential on subsequent disputes in the city from opposition to the early introduction of Poll Tax in Scotland in 1989-90 and also to the Bedroom Tax in 2014 (Gibbs, 2016; Devlin, 2015). There have been several other high profile episodes in the city's history such as the Merrylee builders strike in 1953 where workers in the construction industry marched on the city chambers in opposition to newly built council houses being sold privately (Donaldson and Forster, 1993; Johnstone, 1992). Housing had been central to the polarisation of politics along class lines in the city in the interwar years, with the Independent Labour Party advocating widespread municipal house building in order to clear the slums. The Moderates, a local coalition of Conservatives and Liberals, united in attempting to keep socialism at bay and advocated the need for private house building. Labour took control of Glasgow Corporation in 1933, however the politics of housing did not

remain central to the agenda as unemployment increased in the 1930s (Hughes, 2010). While housing again became a priority in the immediate post-war decades (with Labour and Conservatives fighting elections at a national and local level based upon the number of potential house completions), by the 1970s, the organised trade union movement and associated political representatives had other priorities as unemployment increased, especially for 'skilled' workers (Martin, 1977). Thus from the 1970s onwards disputes in the 'multis' and the 'schemes' relating to neglect, lack of repairs and dampness were largely led by community based organisations throughout the city. The remainder of the article will focus on protests in the Gorbals and Castlemilk areas of Glasgow.

The Gorbals, Castlemilk and *Homes in High Flats*

The obvious link between these two areas of Glasgow was that high rise flats were constructed in both locations. In the Gorbals, Glasgow's first Comprehensive Development Area where the 'slum' tenements were cleared, this was to rehouse and retain the dispersed population in the city centre. Here prominent architects Basil Spence and Robert Mathew were employed to design show case developments at high density for the city's 'modernist' vision for the future (Glendinning and Muthesius, 1994, pp. 220-246). The high rise in Castlemilk, one of Glasgow's four large peripheral housing 'schemes' built in the 1950s, came later, an addition to the low rise modern tenements, built in spite of the already acknowledged issues such as lack of amenities and poor transport infrastructure. Here the blocks were 'off the shelf' systems-built designs by Wimpey. A former architect working for the company suggested in the 1990s that the blocks were built for prestige on their hill top location to illustrate that Glasgow Corporation was tackling the housing shortage in the city (Glendinning and Watters, 1999). Many of the families who were relocated from the Gorbals as a result of comprehensive development were rehoused in Castlemilk.

Both areas were studied by Pearl Jephcott and her research team for the project that would become *Homes in High Flats* published in 1971. This was the most comprehensive contemporary study of high rise in the UK with 1,067 tenants being interviewed city wide. Jephcott seemed somewhat surprised to find that over the whole of her sample 91 percent of the respondents were 'satisfied' living in high rise. She attributed this to the poor housing conditions that people had lived in previously. Many respondents to the questionnaire suggested that their high rise flat was 'way beyond what we were used to' (Jephcott, 1971, p. 48). For many living high in the 1960s was an active choice, they were embracing modernity. However the vision of towers in parks, of Le Corbusier style living, of buildings as machines for living, did not include the threat of collapse or fire, of cutting corners in construction or lack of maintenance.

Yet, it would also seem that those living in high rise in Glasgow were unperturbed by structural safety issues. Jephcott noted that the 'Ronan Point tragedy' occurred while she was conducting the study and no one seemed worried. Similarly there was a 'furious gale' in Glasgow in January 1968, often referred to as a hurricane in popular memory, in which windows were 'sucked in' and 'people saw their furniture

moving across the bedroom' and in some blocks there was no lights or lifts. Yet this did not seem to put people off living in high rise. There was also little fear of fire and Jephcott noted that 'people tended to be careless, not scrupulous about keeping escape doors unbolted' (Jephcott, 1971, p. 48). Many individuals noted that they had not been keen on living high but had 'got used to it'. It is impossible to tell, but perhaps the lack of fear or concern was evidence of resignation. This is not the same as complacency or acceptance, simply that residents were aware that it was not perfect but they had few other options. They were not in the position to buy a house and did not want to return to the exploitative privately rented tenements, although some did. They had waited for years on the council waiting list to get a flat in high rise. In the 1960s working-class Glaswegians were tired of living in overcrowded, vermin infested tenement housing which lacked basic amenities such as heating, hot water and inside toilets and baths. The multis were the best they could do for now. Such lack of choice is widespread for people living in neglected high rise blocks of flats throughout the UK today, in low rise social housing and in the privately rented sector. This was undoubtedly the case for some of those living in Grenfell Tower, both those renting from the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation or privately from owner occupiers.

In the subsequent decades it was the everyday problems that became increasingly entrenched as a result of a persistent failure of authorities to respond to tenants concerns. Lifts continued to break down, people had to endure the inconvenience of blocked refuse chutes, irresponsible neighbours did not take their turn in cleaning communal areas and there was a persistent lack of play space for children. Glasgow historically has a comparatively low wage economy which has meant that rents in council housing could rarely be 'economic'. In other words in the 1970s and 1980s the council was relying on tenants being in receipt of supplementary benefits payments and being able to claim housing benefits. In such circumstances arguably it was difficult to meet, or more accurately prioritise, the repair bills or investment in amenities for council housing stock in the city. Unsurprisingly, high rise in Glasgow therefore became less desirable as working class aspirations changed and people wanted to live in houses, and preferably bought houses, rather than rented flats (Kearns et al, 2017). A growing aspiration for owner occupation among working-class people, encouraged by the Conservative policy which offered sitting tenants the 'right to buy', arguably aided the stigmatisation and 'residualisation' of council housing (Rogaly and Taylor, 2011; Forrest and Murie, 1983).

Over time in Glasgow those that could leave high rise often did, the same is true in other UK cities. Those that remained witnessed a decline in the standards of their environment largely as a result of a council allocations policy which effectively further stigmatised high rise blocks and peripheral 'schemes'. Obviously the experience of individuals and their families are far more nuanced and subjective (Kearns, et al, 2017). Nevertheless, the Gorbals continued to be notorious as it had been in the 1930s, in spite of comprehensive development, and was popularly associated with gangs, violence, crime and drugs. This negative reputation was perpetuated by the press, both locally and nationally. Castlemilk had a similar reputation. This is a narrative that could be applied to many council estates and inner city areas throughout the UK (Shapely, 2017). Yet, in terms of health and wellbeing, Glasgow, a city dependent on manufacturing industry and with a high proportion of municipal housing in the post-war decades, has been disproportionately affected by the interlinked processes of deindustrialisation and the

residualisation of council housing from the late 1970s onwards. In comparative studies with Liverpool and Manchester, cities with similar socio-economic compositions, Glasgow continues to display higher levels of excess mortality, popularly known in the media as the 'Glasgow Effect' (Walsh et al, May 2016).

Fighting Back

However in both the Gorbals and Castlemilk tenants fought back against the local authorities who blatantly blamed individuals for their circumstances and took little responsibility for the problems evident in the housing they managed. In both areas of the city dampness became a very prominent issue in both low and high rise council housing stock (Bryant, 1979, *Castlemilk Press*, September 1972). Inadequate construction methods resulted in water ingress and poor insulation caused condensation on the inside of windows and walls, which turned to ice in winter. The clean air act of 1956 had resulted in the removal of coal fires and many new council properties were built with fully electric heating rather than gas. Electric central heating and the underfloor heating which was installed in much of Glasgow's high rise stock was expensive (*Castlemilk Press*, March 1972). By the 1970s when inflation was increasing and wage levels did not follow suit, people simply could not afford to heat their homes. Many families, especially given high levels of unemployment and insufficient state support in the form of benefits, found themselves in arrears and had their supply cut off completely (Shepherd, 1988). Some families were cooking food on paraffin camping stoves, even in high rise flats, where gas had been banned following Ronan Point (*Castlemilk Press*, March 1972).

Gorbals and 'The Dampness Monster'

The campaign against 'The Dampness Monster' became particularly vociferous in the Gorbals where an 'Anti-Dampness Campaign' was formed in 1975 to lobby the District Council to take action in improving homes and/or relocating residents to suitable homes. The campaign focused on the area of the redeveloped Gorbals known as Hutchesontown or 'Hutchie' E where the flats constructed were known as 'the dampies'. These flats were constructed using the Tracoba method of prefabricated systems building. There were accusations of corruption in the use of such an unsuitable construction method in the wet Scottish climate, which caused such intolerable and inhabitable conditions:

'When I showed the official a room, where the paper is falling off the wall, he asked who slept there. I told him the children, and he said the heavy breathing of the children during the night would cause the dampness'

Gorbals tenant, *Sunday Mail*, 2 November 1975

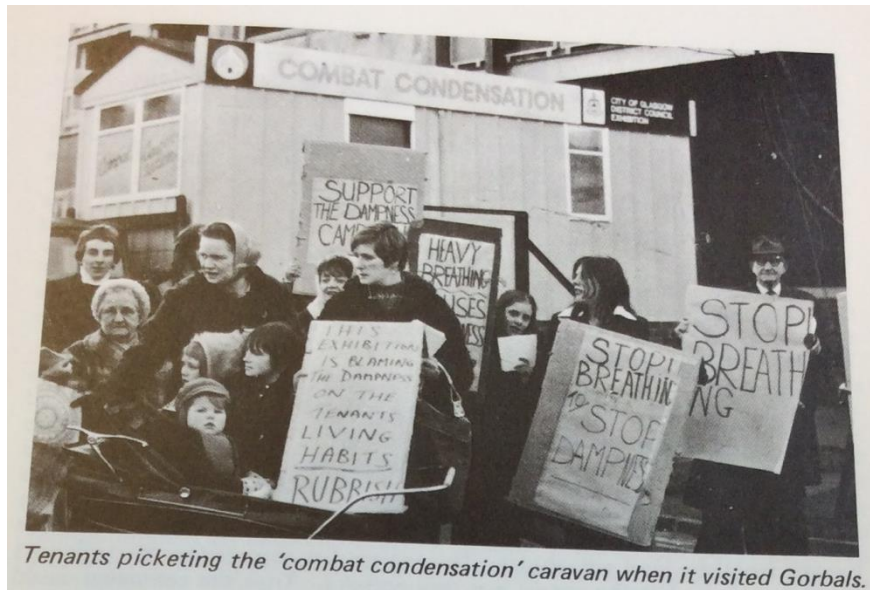
'My health has been affected by the dampness and I am now subject to bronchitis. Water comes through the walls of my children's bedroom and they are also affected in their health. The children sleep in the living-room'

Gorbals tenant, *Newsline*, 10 July 1976

(as quoted in Bryant, 1979, p. 1)

Hutchesontown E was soon acknowledged as 'Scotland's worst example of damp housing' (Bryant, 1979, p. 1). Richard Bryant wrote an account of the campaign to share the successful strategies employed by the Anti-Dampness campaign. The Gorbals had a 'long tradition of community activism and self organisation' and thus the campaign had much support from existing community groups (Bryant, p. 2). Dampness took many forms in the Hutchie E flats and in other areas of the Gorbals, but common complaints were wet, black walls, fungal growth on furnishings and clothing, damp beds, the presence of water beetles and unpleasant smells. Independent surveys commissioned by the campaign found that 70 percent of the Tracoba flats had visible manifestations of dampness. As well as dampness the flats were cold. Some tenants had tried running their heating all day and night, but to little effect and incurring extremely large bills. Some GPs in the area were supportive of patients concerns that the dampness was linked to medical complaints such as respiratory illness and was also having adverse effects on mental health too, causing anxiety and depression. In particular the fact that residents of the flats could be identified by the smell from their clothes caused 'acute social embarrassment'.

The District Council suggested that all of this was caused by the 'living habits' of residents which resulted in condensation. In 1977 a comprehensive study by the National Building Agency placed far more emphasis on design and structural causes than on the life-style of residents. The structure of the buildings was found to be at fault, although there was some criticism of the use of paraffin heaters in creating condensation. Thus, the Anti-Dampness Campaign had a simple aim, to counter the council's claim that dampness was caused by residents and demand healthy habitable homes and compensation for loss of clothing, furniture etc. The council's initial response was to advise residents to turn their heating up and open the windows and even launched a 'condensation campaign' complete with a travelling caravan. The residents organised a boycott:



Source: R. Bryant, *The Dampness Monster*, p. 19.

Eventually, frustrated by the Council's efforts to dismiss their campaign, residents began an organised rent strike in April 1976 complete with support from residents enduring similar conditions in Wester Hailles in Edinburgh. By 1977/8 250 residents were participating in the strike:



Source: R. Bryant, *The Dampness Monster*, p. 21.

The campaigning strategies employed by the Anti-Dampness campaign were varied and simultaneous. The height of the campaign saw 1,000 people march on the Citizen's Theatre in the Gorbals where a mass meeting of residents protested against the conditions they were living in. Such traditional methods were complimented by seeking the expertise of outside professionals, such as community workers, GPs, architects, planners, solicitors, journalists and academics. This was important in boosting the morale of campaigners and to strengthen their bargaining power in arguing with council experts. Yet Bryant cautioned that campaigners should 'not abdicate decision making to outsiders' as 'outside professionals who have little stomach or nerve for the rough and tumble of community politics, may be of only limited value to a local group' (Bryant, 1979, p. 55). He also suggested that campaigners should be aware 'of the tendency for press to personalise issues and neglect the wider social and political significance of problems'. This remains sound advice for campaigners on housing issues forty years later and the Grenfell Action Group are no doubt aware of similar issues in their campaign for justice for survivors of the fire and residents in the other blocks on the Lancaster Road estate.

The Anti-Dampness Campaign resulted in some residents being rehoused and a meagre £100 compensation was offered for damaged property, but this was dependent on the Council not taking responsibility for the dampness. The Council retained its power to dictate the terms, yet the agency of the residents in standing up to them was clear. By 1977 and on the advice of the National Building Agency the Council accepted that significant remedial work was required to make the flats habitable. In the end some councillors suggested that the flats should be demolished, a sentiment shared by the leaders of the Gorbals Anti-Dampness Campaign. Hutchesontown E was eventually bulldozed in 1987. The campaign had illustrated that people could demand improved housing and make their voices heard. They could challenge the council. Activists had proved that they were not to blame for the dampness in their own homes as the council suggested, just as those living in Grenfell tower were not responsible for the power surges in the building, the insufficient provision of safety equipment such as sprinklers or fire alarms, or the highly flammable cladding added to the outside of the blocks.

Campaigning Castlemilk

Campaigns were also mobilised in Castlemilk around housing quality and availability. For local activists, such as John Cooper, still active today, this began in the mid 1970s. Describing the organisation of a protest against faulty lifts in the Mitchellhill high flats, John suggests that:

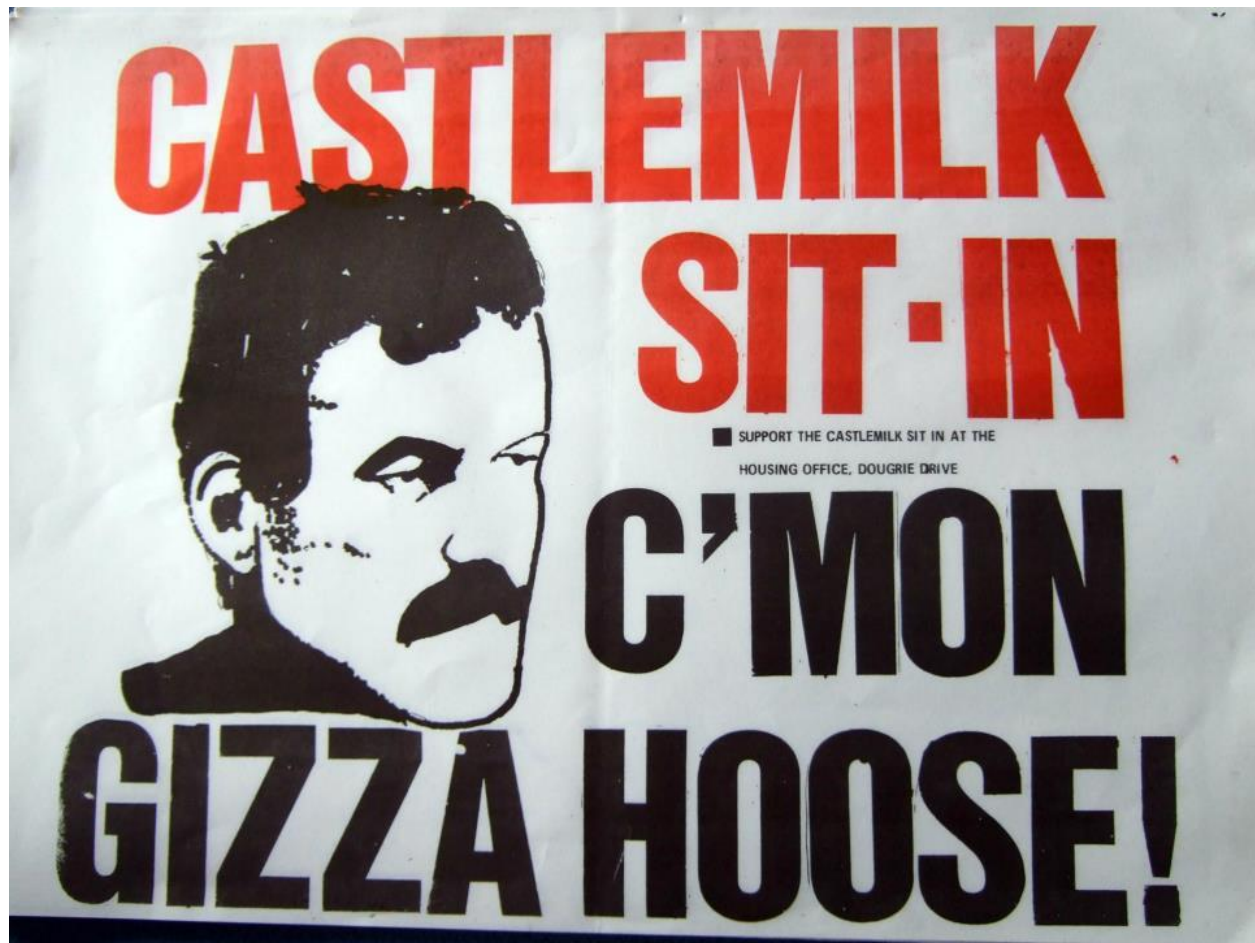
This proved to be a very important learning experience for all of us. So many people turned up the room could barely contain them! This is when we decided on the strategy of a mass open air public meeting. I think there was two or three hundred people at these.

Alongside the meetings we marched on the local Housing Department. Some of the residents who had quickly began to realise the power that organising together had given them, had to be talked out of marching on the City Chambers! (Cooper, 2015)



Source: Castlemilk History, 'Campaigning Castlemilk' ©Jean Devlin

The expertise and campaigning abilities of activists in Castlemilk continued to be in demand in relation to housing. In 1983 three families made homeless by a fire were asked to return to their burnt out homes (McGinn, 1988, pp. 112-115). When they refused, they were informed the council would no longer pay for them to be housed in the homeless unit. This block of modern tenement flats was located in a 'hard to let' area of Castlemilk, with many boarded up properties. The three families were convinced the fire had been caused by a petrol bomb thrown in the empty ground floor flat. The Council was unmoved, this was a police matter. As far as they were concerned the houses were habitable. A group of activists soon formed to support the families and arranged visits to the property by the local MP and television cameras. The word spread and protesters began to congregate outside the Castlemilk Office of the Housing Management Department, sometimes arrests were made if they refused to leave. Plans were made to use court appearances as a campaigning platform and mysteriously the charges were dropped. Although campaigners were confused by this, they went ahead with plans to erect tents in spare ground outside the housing office for the families and protesters to camp in. Instead a sympathetic local man donated three caravans. The following 'sit in' generated a great deal of publicity, thanks to the ingenious promotional posters and leaflets:



Source: John Cooper Collection, Spirit of Revolt Archive, Mitchell Library, Glasgow, GB243 T/SOR/3/7

The caravan occupation lasted four weeks, and while the protest continued legal advice was sought by the families affected. Negotiations were ongoing with the housing office with the case being made on medical grounds. Eventually the council agreed to rehouse the families elsewhere in Castlemilk. There was a feeling among activists that the council was keen to end the campaign, it had just launched the 'Glasgow, Miles Better' campaign, an attempt to change Glasgow's image and encourage regeneration in the city (McGinn, 1988; Maver, 2000).

Without the intervention and solidarity of local activists the council would have moved the three families back into burnt out flats in an area which had hundreds of vacant 'empty lets'. Their success in forcing the rehousing of the families lay in their experience and organisation, some had been involved in the community newspaper, had founded a claimants union and would go on to organise opposition to the poll tax in the area (See John Cooper Collection, Spirit of Revolt Archive, Mitchell library). As was the case in the Gorbals their tactics in causing the council embarrassment was also crucial. More importantly such grassroots activism was successful because it appealed to everyone. The occupation was lively with entertainment and fundraising activities. The publicity material was eye catching and the slogans catchy. In spite of the seriousness of the campaign, there was humour. People wanted to get involved. Castlemilk residents were sick and tired of the reputation of their area, of the way people were

treated, they'd had enough (John Cooper, 2015). But such action, such anger and strength of feeling, is not always enough to facilitate change. In 2018 activists have more ways and means of protesting with the opportunities offered by social media. Yet, this remains easy to ignore, with the authorities simply hoping that the problem will go away, that a fresh controversy will take its place or the public will be distracted by a good news story such as a royal wedding. Moreover, it would seem that not all authorities are as easily embarrassed as Glasgow was in the 1980s, perhaps such organisations have become more resilient to public pressure, especially in a city the size of London.

Conclusion: Housing problems as political dynamite

As Bryant warned in 1979 'housing problems, particularly in a city like Glasgow, are political dynamite and any well-organised action which challenges official policy and express shortcomings is likely to meet with some form of resistance' (p. 55). The same remains true today in Glasgow, in London, throughout the UK and beyond. In the 1970s and 1980s in the Gorbals and Castlemilk residents were able to make their voices heard in spite of the continuing stigmatisation of the areas and types of housing in which they lived. To do so they had to be very well organised. Only when they had significant support in the affected area, could organise mass demonstrations, mount legal challenges, generate press coverage and crucially have the support of 'useful' professional allies (preferably with expertise lacking in the council), were they able to affect change. Local activists had agency in challenging the resistance from the council.

As a result of social and economic change the structural obstacles to safe and affordable housing have arguably increased in the intervening years. As noted the 'right to buy' policy of the Conservative government has had profound implications on the ways in which council housing is viewed, no longer as an aspiration, but as a last resort, re-named derogatively as 'social housing'. In this context, and in spite of earlier activism, the everyday concerns of residents in social housing and in the private rented sector are easy to ignore, even when they are organised. Occasionally there are very vocal acknowledgements of problems which are later quietly forgotten when the press and public have lost interest. Such negligence, which resulted in the spread of fire in Grenfell Tower, has been in evidence for decades in areas which house working class people, either in 'social' housing or in privately rented accommodation. The case study of Glasgow highlights the council's attempt to blame the residents for its failures. Condensation in the Gorbals and the fire in the block of flats in Castlemilk were presented as the residents' fault, the council tried to minimise its responsibility. Those authorities, management organisations and individuals that rent out property continue to try and minimise their responsibility for poor and unsafe housing conditions. Consequently housing continues to be a focus of local activism in Glasgow, taking the form of community organisation such as that in Castlemilk and the Gorbals in the 1970s and 1980s. In Scotland Living Rent, a tenant's union has been formed in response to exploitation in private and 'social' rented accommodation. Individuals can seek advice and support on challenging their landlords to improve conditions in their property. The Glasgow branch are working closely with community activists in areas throughout the city.

Nearly a year has passed since the fire at Grenfell. Yet it would seem that there is little government appetite for increased council house construction from central funding, only provision to enable local authorities to build from their much reduced funding (HM Treasury, November 2017). The focus remains on helping people buy 'starter homes', this time by reducing stamp duty (a measure not applicable in Scotland). At a time when home ownership remains out of reach for many, and not just young people, such a policy seems ludicrous. Increasing home ownership is not the solution to the ongoing 'housing crisis' in the UK. The government continually does not acknowledge the structural barriers to truly affordable housing for all. To do so would undermine their political ideology. Yet such inaction can only result in housing continuing to be 'political dynamite'. Housing is the problem that will not go away if the supply of good quality, safe and affordable rental accommodation is not increased. Moreover, there are thousands of angry people currently being exploited in extremely poor quality housing with unaffordable rents. They are making their voices heard. Individuals and groups are coming together and sharing their experiences, tactics and strategies. The government cannot ignore them forever.

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